

Learning by doing: A city trip combining TBLT, blended learning and social media

Leen Stevens¹ and Viviane Grisez²

Abstract. For several years, the University of MONS (UMONS) has been organising a trip to a Flemish city, either Leuven, Ghent, or Antwerp, for the students on the Masters programmes at the Faculty of Engineering who attend Dutch courses. This project has been combining blended learning and task-based learning for several years, but for the most recent edition (March 2014), a new aspect was added, namely the incorporation of mobile web devices and social media. This new approach was warmly welcomed by the students. The trip became a more personal, more lively and more authentic experience. Moving away from the traditional pen and paper based learning reduced the “school experience” and raised the students’ awareness of social presence (Kehrwald, 2008). This led to much more spontaneous language production during face-to-face interactions with locals and real-time computer-mediated conversations. It also encouraged some competition and led to spontaneous input from the students, and created a new kind of supervision for the teachers. In this paper, the principles which were taken into account to develop the project, as well as the different phases of the project, are presented. This first experience with social media was a successful experiment that should now be integrated in a broader context so it can be used for other language programmes or projects.

Keywords: TBLT, blended learning, social media, language learning.

1. Centre for Modern Languages, UMONS; Leen.Stevens@umons.ac.be.

2. Centre for Modern Languages, UMONS; Viviane.Grisez@umons.ac.be.

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1. Introduction

UMONS, a Francophone Belgian university, organises a yearly trip to a Flemish city, which is considered to be a learning-by-doing activity in the framework of the Dutch Master's classes for students from the Faculty of Engineering.

For several years the trip has been based on two modern language learning approaches, namely the task-based language learning and teaching (TBLT) (Ellis, 2005) and blended learning approaches. TBLT enables students to learn by undertaking concrete action.

In the language activity, which has been carried out over the past ten years, students have to organise the city trip themselves. In order to organise this trip, they took the six task types formulated by Edwards and Willis (2005) and Willis and Willis (2006) to a higher level as their trip to Leuven was not a simulation. It is a very concrete, authentic project in which each individual participant plays a role. The tasks given are as follows: listing and brainstorming, ordering and sorting, matching, comparing, thinking and problem solving, stimulating more interaction, and the most complex task, sharing personal experiences and story-telling. The teacher acts only as a supervisor. The students have to find solutions themselves by looking up information and expressing their opinions (Prabhu, 1987). The project also makes use of blended learning: it combines individual e-learning exercises with face-to-face classroom conversational activities and computer-mediated instruction in the language lab.

The most recent edition of the city trip (Leuven, March 2014) added a new component: the use of social media and the opportunity to have an online exchange of information in real-time. Social media is very present in our lives, young people's lives in particular, and this offers a great opportunity for language teachers as they can move away from pen and paper to create more lively and more authentic tasks which can lead to more involved and more enthusiastic students (Kern & Warschauer, 2000).

This paper shows the impact of social media on the students who participated in their self-organised city trip.

2. Method

The project consisted of three stages: the pre-task, the task and the review (Ellis, 2005; Willis, 1996).

2.1. The pre-task

The project was launched in the classroom by solving the unit “visiting a city” on the online learning platform www.franel.eu. FRANEL is the outcome of a collaboration between three academic partners in neighbouring regions: UMONS in Wallonia, KULAK, KU Leuven in Flanders, and Université Charles de Gaulle Lille 3 in Lille, France. The website consists of several themes for learners of French or Dutch at A2-level (CEFR). Each of these themes offers the learner a series of exercises based on video clips. During this pre-task, the students revised the lexicon concerning “giving and asking directions” and “taking public transport”. They also discovered the city and they formulated their expectations and opinions.

2.2. The task

The task consisted of two parts: the preparation of the trip at the home university and the city trip itself.

2.2.1. Preparation

In this preparatory stage, the students worked in small groups in the language lab. Each group had to gather as much information as possible on Dutch websites on the following topics: city history and architecture, tourism, transport, lunch, meetings at the city’s university, and day schedule and programme, to name but a few. Afterwards, they had to present their findings to each other, find compromises and make their preparations, i.e. send the necessary e-mails, make reservations and order tickets.

2.2.2. City trip

The most important objective of the city trip was face-to-face communication with locals. In order to motivate the students to speak Dutch, they had to gather information at the market. They worked together in small groups. In 2013, it was noted that the students were not really competitive and that the groups collaborated by exchanging their answers. To avoid this, the teachers created three different routes through the city for the most recent trip that took place in March 2014. Each group could meet the other groups but exchanging information would have been absolutely useless. Moreover, each group was provided with online tasks and had access to a blog on which there were ten common questions. These questions were not included in their search but it was an extra challenge

based on current events in the city (Leuven). The students could only solve these extra questions by talking to locals and to students. A page was also created on Facebook on which the students had to share their experiences by posting pictures (selfies and others) and self-made clips, and where they could react to each other's written comments. To make sure they would be active on Facebook, this activity was part of their task. The students were learning Dutch the whole day, applying blended learning and learning-by-doing principles without even being aware of the learning process.

2.3. Review

The week following the trip, the students had to tell each other how they had found Leuven. Each group had different things to share as they had had different questions to answer in Leuven. The students also had to correct each other's writing on Facebook, which gave them another opportunity to revise their Dutch grammar.

3. Evaluation of the city trip in combination with real-time computer-mediated communication

On the whole, it must be said that Facebook had an added value to the trip to Leuven. The intention was to make the passive students more active and more interactive. This goal was certainly achieved: all of the students were surprised by the innovating aspect that Facebook created and they were immediately drawn into the project. The online activity made the trip more authentic for them because they did not associate this modern networking tool with their studies, only with their friends.

The impact of the awareness of social presence was also seen, online as well as offline. The different groups felt connected because of the page on Facebook. They had contact with each other and also with their friends who were not even part of the Dutch class. This was extra stimulation for them to post photos and comments on Facebook, even if it was not a part of their project. They even made jokes in Dutch and posted photos of their "new Flemish friends".

Furthermore, this new medium allowed the teachers to supervise their students constantly from a distance, in such a way that the students were not aware of it. They felt as if they had the freedom to discover the city, without any supervision. In reality, they provided real time evidence of how they were organising themselves and how they were interacting with the local population.

When asked how this trip could be improved, they suggested to turn this one day-trip into a weekend as it takes some time to answer all the questions. One group completed the task, but they had not had enough time to meet the locals. The groups that had taken time to interact with the locals had not been able to finish their search. All the groups were involved in the project and they had even forgotten about the extra blog with the ten questions.

The combination of face-to-face conversations and real-time online activity was warmly welcomed by the students. Now, the next step is to implement the use of the new social media in a larger context. For this approach to be more than a one-off experience it must be extended and turned into a full mixed pedagogy. That way it can be adapted easily for other language courses or for other projects. Facebook was chosen for this project because of the students' familiarity with the network, but other social networks (Twitter, Instagram, etc.) also offer new possibilities.

4. Conclusion

This paper has shown how a trip in the context of a language course, based on task-based learning and blended learning, turned into an authentic, interactive city trip by incorporating new social media. The city trip demonstrated how the awareness of a social presence and online interactivity reduced the "school experience" so that the passive students became really enthusiastic about doing the required tasks. This positive first experience with real-time online communication must inspire the modernisation of traditional language courses and help teachers to turn away from "simulations" within the confines of the classroom. New media (tablets, phones, computers, etc.), in combination with the internet and the students' familiarity with social networks, provides the means to interact with the world and apply even more authentic learning-by-doing and blended learning principles. The next challenge is to develop standard exercises, based on real computer-mediated communication, that can be easily applied for any language course and for several types of projects. A further challenge is to systemise the use of social media in language courses.

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